Education & Skills
Funding Agency

Guidance

School resource management advisers: information for academy trusts

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Applies to England

Contents

This publication is available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-school-resource-management-advisers-srma-programme/school-resource-management-advisers-information-for-academy-trusts

1. About school resource management advisers (SRMAs)

Following the success of the pilot in 2017 to 2018, the Department for Education continues to offer independent and accredited SRMAs to support schools and academy trusts. SRMAs are independent advisers, not employed directly by the department, who have experience of managing resources in the education sector. They are trained to suggest alternative uses for available resources to find more efficient ways to deliver the best possible educational outcomes for pupils.

SRMAs may be practicing school business managers and school leaders currently working in schools or trusts, or consultants working for themselves or for an education consultancy organisation. They all have significant experience of school business management and have undergone a challenging accreditation process.

Education Performance Improvement Ltd is currently contracted to deliver induction and accreditation for new SRMAs to ensure they have the right skills and experience for their role. All SRMAs are linked with one of the SRMA suppliers, North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) or the Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL).

Each SRMA supplier and the SRMAs working with them are legally bound to maintain confidentiality and comply with data protection rules while carrying out deployments. You can view information about the School Resource Management Adviser contracts the department has in place with the suppliers on the Contracts Finder (https://www.gov.uk/contracts-finder) website.

SRMA visits are funded by the department; academy trusts do not have to pay for this support.

2. Purpose and overview of an SRMA visit

The SRMA offer is open to all schools. The objective of most SRMA deployments is to support schools to make best use of available resource to provide an outstanding education for pupils. In all cases a named case lead in the department will commission the visit and act as a point of contact for the academy trust and the SRMA.

In cases where an academy trust is financially stable, the SRMA will work with that trust to consider different ways to optimise resources and potentially reduce unnecessary spend that could be reinvested by the trust into the areas that are of most importance in delivering the best possible education to pupils.

In cases where an academy trust has a deficit, or is forecasting a deficit, the SRMA will look at the underlying reasons for this position and support the trust to develop strategies to return the trust to financial stability.

If an academy trust has forecast a deficit for the current year, the Education and Skills Funding Agency may ask for a revised financial plan, incorporating recommendations agreed with the SRMA, to demonstrate how the trust will improve its resource management and financial situation.

In each deployment, the SRMA will conduct an initial review of financial data and metrics. They will arrange a series of meetings with the academy trust, including members of the SLT and governors. During these meetings the SRMA will discuss the trust's data and approach to financial and resource management, asking questions to gain a better understanding of the trust's vision and context.

The SRMA will cover the range of school resource management tools and guidance available, with a focus on integrated curriculum and financial planning (ICFP). If a trust is not already using ICFP, the SRMA will talk through the benefits of this approach and the tools available. If the trust already uses ICFP, the SRMA will discuss how the metrics are being used to support planning.

At the end of the initial deployment, the SRMA will discuss their findings with the academy trust and present recommendations for consideration; it is up to each trust to decide which recommendations they want to take forward. The SRMA will also ask the trust for initial feedback at this point.

SRMAs produce a report for each deployment which follows a standard format but can be adapted to suit each visit. It will include key efficiency metrics, the SRMA's analysis and their recommendations based on their review. All reports are quality assured to ensure they are clear and factually accurate. Once finalised, the case lead will send the report to the chair of trustees and the accounting officer. Academy trusts can expect the report within 3-4 weeks of their final meeting with the SRMA.

All deployments include a follow-up meeting with an SRMA, six months after the academy trust receives the SRMA's report. This is an opportunity to discuss progress and next steps, to ask any questions and to consider whether any further support would be helpful. At the same time, the department will send an evaluation workbook for completion, which gathers feedback and helps measure the impact of the programme to ensure it continues to meet schools' and academy trusts' needs.

Academy trusts may request a bespoke deployment to look at a specific issue or aspect related to financial planning and management if it is within the remit of the SRMA programme.

You can discuss this with your case lead or email us at ESFA.SRMA@education.gov.uk if you have not been allocated a case lead.

3. Before the SRMA's visit

Once a deployment has been agreed, the department will commission an SRMA from one of two suppliers: the Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL) or North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC).

The case lead will contact the academy trust to confirm the allocated SRMA's name and check there is no conflict of interest from the trust's perspective. Conflicts of interest are rare. Examples include situations where a trust employs a close relative of the SRMA, or that the SRMA was previously employed at a trust.

Deployments incorporate the use of the View my financial insights (VMFI) tool which compares academy data with 30 of the most similar academies and allows users to filter custom characteristics to create segmentation across a variety of datasets. Academy trusts are also able to see a snapshot of this comparison across all the academies within their trust (for multi-academy trusts), and the difference between their financial performance and the median value for their comparator group.

Through access to a broader range of data and insights, the tool supports academy finance teams in 3 ways:

- increasing efficiency by reducing the need for desk-based research regarding financial insights and data.
- providing up-to-date and customisable data insights to help identify areas for further investigation.
- offering access to commercial resources including government contracts, frameworks and guidance.

If you are not already familiar with the tool you can find guidance on navigating the view my financial insights tool (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-trusts-view-my-financial-insights) on GOV.UK.

The SRMA will contact the academy trust to arrange dates for their visit. This initial call is also an opportunity for trusts to inform the SRMA about any specific areas of concern and for the SRMA to ask initial questions to better understand the trust's context. During this call the SRMA will confirm any additional information they need from an academy trust ahead of their visit, as well as the things they will want to look at when they visit.

3.1 Documents the SRMA may ask for in advance include:

- Latest budget and financial plan – to include at least one previous year and the starting balances for the current year
- Pupil numbers actual and forecast
- Staff list and Staffing Structure – ideally including total teaching staff FTE and support staff FTE, teaching, support and non-curriculum staff costs, SLT and TLR costs
- Curriculum planning documents
- Completed Self-Assessment (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-resource-management-self-assessment-tool)
- Contracts register

3.2 View my financial insights

As part of the deployment process, SRMAs are encouraged to use the VMFI tool to complete their initial review of an academy trust. The department will ask academy trusts to grant the allocated SRMA access to this information through the VMFI portal for the duration of the deployment. The case lead will provide instructions on how to do this.

The case lead will brief the SRMA on the background of each academy trust and highlight any key areas of possible focus for the visit. They will also provide some additional financial data, including a copy of the trust's latest budget forecast return and recent budget plan and/or management accounts (if the trust has previously provided these documents to the ESFA). Academy trusts should speak to their case lead if they have any questions about the documents to be shared with the SRMA.

4. During the SRMA's visit

Where possible, the department suggests the SRMA should conduct their visit in-person, as this helps them to get a full picture of an academy trust's context and build rapport with the leadership team. However, recent experience has shown that entirely virtual deployments, conducted though Zoom or Teams calls, can be effective and may be more appropriate in some cases. The case lead will discuss this with a trust when organising the deployment.

The SRMA is likely to spend a total of 1-3 days with the academy trust, depending on the complexity and scope of the deployment. These may be consecutive days or individual days or half days, spread over a longer period. The SRMA has 6 weeks from their initial meeting with a trust (or 10 days after their last meeting, whichever is shorter) to submit their report.

The SRMA will hold an initial meeting with the academy trust at the beginning of their visit. It is up to the trust to agree with the SRMA who should represent them at this meeting, but it might reasonably include the head teacher, the finance director/school business manager and the chair of governors, or the equivalent senior leaders in a MAT, e.g., the chief executive, chair of trustees, and chief financial officer.

The SRMA will discuss their initial analysis of the academy trust's data and agree with the trust where they will focus the rest of their time. They will also agree a schedule of meetings with the appropriate people at the trust.

SRMAs will consider a series of questions about financial governance, resource allocation, benchmarking and ICFP. SRMAs will make a series of recommendations for using resources to best effect, which may include suggesting ways to streamline and improve existing plans and practices, embedding ICFP, minimising burdens on staff and removing unnecessary workload. They should also discuss and signposting academy trusts to the range of national deals, tools and resources available.

The SRMA will identify the costed savings that each recommended action could generate and produce a first draft of their report. At the end of the deployment, the SRMA will hold a further meeting with the academy trust to present their findings and discuss the recommendations. They will ask the trust for feedback and initial thoughts about their recommendations.

4.1 documents the SRMA may ask for during the visit:

- management accounts
- schemes of delegation
- Latest board meeting or finance committee meeting minutes.

The SRMA will use this information to develop an understanding of the academy trust's financial health and approach to resource management, how it compares against benchmarks and to consider areas of focus for their visit. SRMAs are encouraged to use their own ICFP diagnostic tools as well as the department's ICFP resources (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/integrated-curriculum-and-financial-planning-icfp), financial benchmarking tool (https://schools-financial-benchmarking.service.gov.uk/), the Self-Assessment and the workforce-benchmarking tool (https://department-for-education.shinyapps.io/schools-workforce-benchmarking/).

5. After the SRMA's visit

The SRMA will share their findings and draft report with the department. All reports are quality assured to ensure clarity and factual accuracy. The case lead will raise any questions with the SRMA but it is for the SRMA to make any changes to their report. The case lead will share the final report with the academy trust's Chair and Accounting Officer.

It is a up to academy trusts to decide which of the SRMA's recommendations they will take forward, based on their individual circumstances. Trusts may not agree with every recommendation the SRMA suggests. The department expects trusts to implement recommendations that will help improve resource management and target funding to areas that have the greatest impact on pupil outcomes. If trusts decide not to take any of the recommendations forward they should be able to explain why that is the right decision for their context.

In some cases, usually where an academy trust is in deficit or forecasting a deficit for the current year, the ESFA will ask them to develop a revised financial plan. As part of an SRMA visit, the SRMA may be asked to support a trust to develop this plan. Where applicable, the case lead will have discussed this with the trust ahead of the SRMA visit and agreed next steps. The trust will own its own financial plan, which should set out how it intends to address the financial situation.

When the department delivers the SRMA's report to the academy trust, the email will include a link to a feedback survey. The department uses this feedback to understand what has worked well and what more it can do to improve the programme to best support school and trusts.

Six months after sending out the SRMA's report, the department will contact the academy trust to arrange a follow-up meeting. This will usually be virtual and should take no more than half a day of the trust's time. This conversation is an opportunity to discuss progress over the last six months and possible next steps. The SRMA can offer further advice on implementing recommendations where appropriate. For continuity, the department will try to commission the same SRMA that conducted the original visit.

As part of this follow-up, academy trusts are asked to complete an evaluation workbook that sets out the SRMA's original recommendations and asks for actual and planned savings against each one. The SRMA can help the trust to complete this return. Where trusts are not planning to take recommendations forward, or where they have not yet finalised their plans, they will be asked to provide a short narrative explaining their reasoning. The workbook is not intended to question the trust's progress on delivering their plans as it is up to trusts to decide whether the SRMA recommendations are appropriate for their context. The process is intended to help the department measure the impact of the SRMA programme and better understand its value for the sector. This feedback also helps the department to further tailor the programme to meet schools' and trusts' needs in future.

In some instances, an academy trust may want further advice or support following a deployment and may ask an SRMA or their supplier organisation to provide this. While the department is clear that the purpose of a deployment is not for SRMAs to promote their own independent consultancy offer, the department is supportive of SRMAs continuing to provide support to trusts where this is requested, needed, and represents good value for money. Any ongoing support must be agreed independently between the trust and the SRMA, after the end of the deployment, taking account of the trust's procurement processes and SRMA's own contractual obligations and other commitments.

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